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Croatian libraries meeting the multicultural challenge

Public libraries in a global society necessarily face a multicultural challenge. Croatian public libraries started responding to this challenge in 1990. Nowadays most of the multicultural services in Croatian public libraries are based on principles of serving information needs of national minorities living in Croatia, according to a model of central libraries for each minority. The Croatian Government decided to support such a model for each minority represented with more than 5.000 inhabitants (by international standard). This model has envisaged the employment of at least one librarian, a member of ethnic minority in each of the central minority libraries.

The support of the Government was used for book acquisition, library equipment and salaries of librarians working in those libraries. From the year 2000 the financing was transferred to the Ministry of Culture.

There are nine central minority libraries in Croatia

1. Central library for **Czech** minority, (Public Library, Bjelovar),
2. Central library for **Hungarian** minority, (Public Library Beli Manastir)
3. Central library for **Italian** minority, (Public Library Pula)
4. Central library for **Albanian** minority, (Public library "Bogdan Ogrizović", Zagreb),
5. Central library for **Ruthenian/Ukrainian** minority, (Zagreb City Library),
6. Central library for **Slovenian** minority, (Public Library Karlovac) and
7. Central library for **Serbian** minority, (Serbian Cultural Association "Prosvjeta", Zagreb)
8. Central library for **Slovak** minority, (Public Library Našice)
9. Central library for **Austrian** minority, (City and University Library, Osijek)

They are all attached to public libraries in the areas densely populated with certain minorities, with

the exception of the Serbian one which is operating within activities of the Serbian Cultural Association «Prosvjeta» in Zagreb.

We usually also take in account the **Jewish** library which is a part of the Jewish Community in Zagreb, though there are less than 5.000 Jews in Croatia. Although it has a long history, the Jewish library, with a very rich and valuable collection, has not yet been organized according to contemporary librarianship principles. To that end the Ministry of Culture will support the project of its professional establishment.

The professional work of central minorities libraries has been supervised by the county libraries and county supervision services, which are responsible for their development and the quality of their work as well as the work of public and school libraries in each county. The existing public library system was established in 1995 with the formation of new administrative units – counties, and the county libraries. There are 18 county libraries in Croatia that are central points for public and school library development.

Croatian Standards for public libraries (1999) introduced the obligation of every public library in a municipality with a minority population of over 1,500 to provide an adequate number of books written in minority languages. Therefore, many public libraries in Croatia have foreign literature collections for minorities and maintain close ties with central libraries fulfilling in this way the needs of local communities. Our Standards are in accordance with the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (services of central minority libraries in Croatia are a part of the public library services in general). They are seen as integral to any library service of the public library system but they also have a special role. In addition to all the information services in minority language for the specific minority as well as for other residents, they serve as promotion centers of the ancestral countries' culture and language in Croatia. They are open to all the citizens of Croatia, as well as to immigrants, asylum seeking persons, refugees and residents with temporary stay permit, migrant workers and national minorities, and therefore serve as multicultural meeting and information points in the country. These libraries cooperate among themselves, exchanging ideas, books and other materials, organizing meetings and discussing common issues (like acquisitions from ancestral countries,

stimulating writing and publishing on their mother tongues etc,) and also with the IFLA standards - Multicultural communities: guidelines for library service.

Collections of these libraries comprise mostly of traditional materials - books and periodicals, and less of non-book materials and new media. During the past decade most of the public libraries have been automated which facilitated cataloguing, statistics and cooperation as well as work with library users. Modern technologies play an important role in serving multicultural population, especially the Internet and web services of public libraries.

The existing concept represents traditional multicultural library services focused on providing books and other materials to ethnic minorities. We know that the present model is only a step toward the path toward real multiculturalism our libraries must reach, but in the time it was implemented it was the best and a very welcome practice in our society.

Having been at the crossroad of many cultures, Croatia got to know and recognized culturalism long time ago. Cultural diversity is its reality today too.

Many libraries have collections of foreign literature. Multicultural services have been provided in many public libraries along the Croatian Adriatic Coast and on the islands in summer. A great number of foreign tourists seek different information and literature in their own language. They sometimes bring new ideas and donate foreign literature. Besides, there are institutions like the Goethe Institute library and French reading room in Zagreb with very rich libraries.

Our Librarian's Association, division for public libraries designed a Strategy on development of public libraries in Croatia which points out in particular:

- definition of Public library as part of the Croatian library system and at the same time participant of a global library
 - necessity of researching community needs
 - necessity of identifying groups of users with special needs – members of minority communities among others and their involvement into libraries' activities
- promoting library teams and all aspects of multicultural service delivery

- enabling better accessibility of books and other materials in the mother tongue as well as coordination in creating collections truly representative of the pluralistic population they serve
- permanent education for librarians
- preserving tradition while encouraging multiculturalism in society as a whole by presenting and promoting minority cultures and cultures of other countries and nations.

It is necessary to proclaim in Croatia the importance of public libraries and librarianship in general and therefore multicultural services as a potential for the local community. We must constantly develop public libraries to meet the changing needs of users in an increasingly networked society. The concept of the library is changing and cooperation on a far larger scale than before will be needed, especially in direction of networking technologies and providing more information about multicultural services to the public.

The Ministry of Culture recognizes many tasks that include:

- improving, spreading and promoting multicultural librarianship,
- reevaluating the efforts in this area after 15 years experience in helping to redefine the nature of the library in a multicultural society.
- educating the public, potential users in multiculturalism, traditions, language and culture of ethnic communities living in the neighborhood, raising awareness of the issues of diversity
- encouraging and supporting publishing in many languages both with Croatian and Croatian minorities publishers (we already have examples of many Croatian publishers (like Center for Peace Studies, Center for Human Rights, Croatian Law Center are specialized in publishing multilingual handbooks and topics of interest to multilingual and multicultural populations living here in Croatia, whether inhabiting our country, being immigrants or temporarily employed in some job or business, books and periodicals in Czech, Hungarian, Italian Ukrainian, Italian or Serbian languages

- subsidizing training programs for library services staff.

We know that a library should not be an island and we also know that a minority library should not become a ghetto. So it is on us to do our best in the near future to work on establishing ever closer links between minority libraries and public libraries they are part of.

What we would like to achieve is to see doors of public libraries widely open to all their users, not only users but also accidental visitors who will become users, libraries offering all kinds of services and all kinds of information (what our libraries certainly do to some extent).

It is also our duty in the Ministry of Culture, together with our librarian community, to implement elements of multiculturalism as declared in the developing strategy for improving public libraries status, to provide funds for forming representative collections, for renovating buildings and equipment and for networking in order to meet the needs of pluralist population they serve - to expand the definition of multiculturalism beyond local frontiers and central minority libraries and thus become a part of the multicultural world.